

Coexistence with Islam

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According to some friends resident in very distant places on the planet –Argentina, the United States, England, Sweden... – the dissemination of cheap and generally unreliable copies of the Koran has taken off spectacularly since the monstrous attack on the Twin Towers. It seems that the Holy Book of Muslims is sold in markets and on street corners along with comics, crime novels and gossip magazines. The buyer browses it anxiously, in search of lethal and threatening sentences of holy war and pauses at some aleyas and certain suras to underline them with a red pencil, in order to read them later with the family or in a coffee shop chat: “Look at what it says!” “Listen to this paragraph!” For the reader and those who listen, the link is clear: the Koran has been the source of inspiration for Bin Laden and the terrorists who blew up the planes they were flying into the heart of Manhattan.

As we know today, all the national mythologies and so-called historical chronicles that legitimise the existence and perpetuity of the peoples, nations and religious doctrines were written, erased, rewritten, expurgated and manipulated over the centuries, and the holy texts of monotheism are no exception. During the five thousand years of human history, anything opposed to an ancient apocryphal legend is not the truth but a new falsification or rehash.

It would be useless to recall, as Alain Gresh did in *Le Monde diplomatique* just over a year ago, that an equally hurried reading of the Bible, in particular of Genesis, would also provide us with disturbing surprises: the divine threats

of punishment, plagues, floods, annihilation by fire and the extermination of whole peoples are even more imposing than those of the Book revealed to Mohammad. The same violent and angry God is the great vector of our lives and property in the three monotheist religions and the same contradictions in the Bible between the cruel vicissitudes of the chosen people (today we know that the existence of figures such as Abraham and Moses is more than uncertain) and the love so beautifully exalted in the *Song of Songs* are found between the Koran of tolerance and peace and that which preaches the jihad. But the critical-historical position, widely accepted in the West (except for some neoconservative and fundamentalist groups), is not yet accepted by the Umma Group. The Sudanese theologian Muhammad Taha was hung in 1985 by General Numeiry’s regime after being sentenced to death in a fatwa issued by Al-Azhar University for having established that the Holy Book of the Muslims was revealed in two phases, first in Mecca and then in Medina. The primacy of the text on individual awareness and its absolute timelessness over the historical future explains the difficult adaptation of Muslim countries to the modernity inaugurated by the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment and Kant’s philosophy.

It would be deluded to claim, as I have sometimes read, the appearance of a laic Islam – a laic Church cannot even exist! –, but we can contribute in one way or another to the emergence of Muslim societies and groups in tune with the individual and democratic values

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But the healthy debate about Islam underway in the European countries with Muslim immigration is juxtaposed with an Islamophobia now set, in recent times, within the politically correct framework of some easily predictable consequences.

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The phenomenon is not new and goes back to the 8th century, when the armies of Arabs or of converts to Islam approached the frontiers of what would later be Europe and entered it, first through the Iberian Peninsula and centuries later through what we now call the Balkans. Since the middle of the last century, many authors have dealt with the issue rigorously and serenely: I am thinking about Norman Daniel, Robert Southern, Hichem Djaït, Edward Said, to cite a few examples. Around twenty years ago I approached this subject in *Crónicas sarracinas* [*Saracen Chronicles*¹] and, as I have nothing to add to or take away from what I wrote then, I will take the liberty of citing a few paragraphs that deal with the subject at hand: “Owing to the threat that Islam (Arabic or Turkish) meant for the Christian world between the 8th and 17th centuries, the Muslim world occupies a central position, qualitatively distinct from that of other non-European civilisations (Buddhist, Brahman, etc). This explains, as the Tunisian historian Hichem Djaït has seen very well, the persistence of an acute and tenacious ‘anti-Islamic sensibility on all levels of European sub-consciousness.’ In virtue of the

known self-identifying dialectic which exists between the self and the world, the self and the non-self, Islam has represented for the Western Christian world a self-awareness raising role in terms of opposition and contrast: that of otherness, that of the ‘intimate adversary’ too close to be completely exotic and too tenacious, coherent and compact to be domesticated, assimilated or overpowered. Consequently there is a history, a tradition of thought, a legend, a rhetoric, a grouping of Islamic images or clichés created by and for the West which impose an insurmountable distance between what is ‘ours’ (seen, of course, with an awareness of superiority and self-satisfaction) and what is ‘theirs’ (contemplated with hostility or contempt). [...] “It is certainly enough to open any history book to see the systematic use of a double terminology: appreciative when applied to the Western world, contemptuous when looking at the ‘Easterners’. On the one hand, there is mention of ‘expansion’, ‘ecumenical vocation’, ‘civilising mission’; on the other, of ‘invasion’, ‘avalanche’, ‘sudden burst of hordes’. The same textbook that describes the cruelty of the Ottoman sultans in great detail, covers the autos-da-fé of the Inquisition or the white or red terror of our revolutions with a veil of discretion. We will search in vain for the expression ‘Christian fanaticism’. [...] “In fact, as nobody can ignore, fanaticism is well distributed among the human race and none of the three religious creeds of the ‘peoples of the Book’ is free of it. Without going back to distant eras, the last decade provides impressive examples not only in Afghanistan, Sudan and Algeria, but in Europe itself. I was a direct witness of the genocide of more than one hundred thousand people by Karadzic and his people for the simple fact of sociologically being Muslims; and these massacres, methodi-

1. London, Quartet Books, 1992.

cally programmed, earned their perpetrator the title of Most Devoted Servant of Our Lord Jesus Christ bestowed by the hierarchies of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In terms of fanaticism of the ultra orthodox Israelis, channelled by another famous war criminal – I refer to Sharon –, we are all too conscious of it to make it necessary to evoke his exploits. The religious wars between Muslims, Jews, Catholics and Protestants are the product of an intolerance that the rationalist thinkers fought against, from Sebastian Castellio, author of *Against Calvin*, to Voltaire. The following phrase from Castellio has sometimes been cited with reference to the execution of Miguel Servet: ‘Killing a man to defend an idea is not defending an idea: it is killing a man.’ Another illustrious freethinker, our countryman Blanco White, summarised in some verses written in Spanish his experience of the different fanaticisms he came up against throughout his life, both in Spain and in England: ‘You who have roots in heaven / Can never leave the earth in peace.’”

Having said this, I return to the central theme of these pages: that of coexistence with Islam. I will not spend time on remote examples, like those often cited with reference to al-Andalus and later to the Ottoman Empire. I will say in passing that we should not idealise such models and imagine, like some naïve al-Andalusian experts, that both al-Andalus and the Christian kingdoms of the Peninsula experienced a kind of multicultural idyll. The reality was less beautiful and the periods of peace and interracial coexistence alternated with others of conflicts and wars.

Islam was defeated in 1492 and the expulsion of the Jews and Moriscos produced, for good or ill, a homogenisation of Spanish society which with few variations endured until around fifteen years ago, the date of the arrival of Maghrebian and Asian immigration. But in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean, the Eu-

rope-Islam confrontation lasted until the last century. The feared Great Turk of the times of Cervantes, which then became the ‘sick man’ of Europe, disappeared after its defeat in the First World War. Throughout the 19th century, France had extended its domains in the Maghreb, England in the Indian subcontinent, Russia in Central Asia, the Netherlands in Indonesia. With Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq and the current Arab Emirates, Paris and London dominated almost the whole of the Islamic world with the exception of the new Turkey of Atatürk, Iran and Afghanistan. In terms of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, they were semi-desert states and of little economic importance until the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia in 1928. In short: until the end of the Second World War, the Islamic world lived subjected to the domination of the European “civiliser” and its dependence and prostration with respect to the West were a consequence of its anachronism, internal weakness and intellectual and social inertia.

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The reaction of those occupied and supposedly civilised by Europe (sometimes with the “help” of chemical weapons and poisonous gases, as happened in Iraq, the Rif and Ethiopia) was paradoxically founded on the ecumenical principles of the French Revolution, on the American President Wilson’s Fourteen Points and, later, on the founding Charter of the United Nations. The flagrant contradiction between the civilising precepts of the European powers and their colonial practice had already been condemned in 1834 by an Algerian writer, Hamdan Judcha, when, after welcoming the emancipation of Greece and Belgium and the interest caused by the freedom of Poland, he

bitterly observed in Algeria “its unhappy inhabitants subjected to arbitrariness, extermination and the corresponding scars of war, and all these horrors [were] perpetrated in the name of free France.”

As we know, the nationalism which was the forerunner of Atatürk and of Abdelkrim el Jattabi gradually won over the Arab and Muslim countries until wrenching from their metropolises a more or less traumatic independence. Unfortunately, this independence did not change their feudal and authoritarian structures, as was the case in some monarchies, or engender supposedly progressive military or single party dictatorships such as Egypt, Iraq, Syria or Algeria. From 1946 to the early seventies, nationalism was the driving force of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries while Islam moved onto another level. But everything changed because of Israel’s lightening victory in the Six-Day War, the assassination of Sadat and the so-called oil crisis, with the consequent rise in the prices of crude oil. Wahabi Islamism with its different branches – Egyptian Muslim Brothers, Salafists of the Maghreb – came to be the reference point both of the traditional national bourgeoisies and of the Arab and Muslim masses excluded from modernity.

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This expansion of the most extreme branch of the strictest legal school of the four existing in Sunnism – I refer to the Hanbali – seemed until then, beyond some isolated outbreaks, difficult to undertake. Its rigour on the doctrinal and social level had inspired the Barcelona traveller Domènec Badia, who used the pseudonym Ali Bey, a very pertinent reflection that maintains its validity after two centuries: the religious ideals of the Wahabis, he writes in

his *Travels*, “will find a serious impediment to their dissemination in the richest and most advanced cities and regions [outside the Arabian Peninsula], due to the extreme rigidity of their principles, incompatible with the customs of the Arab nations in contact with modern civilisation and the benefits that go with it,” so that, he adds, “if the Wahabis do not give way a little in the severity of these principles, it seems to me impossible for Wahabism to spread to other countries beyond the desert.”

What neither Ali Bey nor anyone else could predict was that the enormous profit gained from the exporting of crude oil would bestow on the Saudi dynasty, through the famous Aramco, a totally disproportionate economic power in relation to its political dimension and its non-existent cultural importance, a power that would permit it to promote its doctrine, as rigorist as it was retrograde, not only in the most advanced Arab Muslim countries in political, social and cultural terms, but also, through immigration, in the ambit of the current European Union. Since the early eighties, the professors and imams sent to the countries of the Maghreb in the framework of well-intentioned but unsuccessful Arabisation programmes – mostly Egyptians or Syrians trained in the Saudi medersas – began to sow the seeds of Wahabism in the valley of the Nile and the North of Africa, politicised to the extreme their religious discourse and were often the generating nucleus of radical groups who presented themselves, as twenty years earlier the ultranationalists and Marxists had, as a viable alternative to the oppressive and corrupt regimes of the Arab world. Moreover, this alternative attracted the traditional middle classes, the professionals with university diplomas with precarious and badly paid work and the dispossessed masses condemned to unemployment and marginalisation. If the dictatorships of Egypt and Tunisia managed to liquidate political Islamism through a bru-



tal repression, in the last twelve years Algeria has suffered a bloody civil war or, rather, an undeclared war against the civil population by armed Islamist groups and the patriotic militias and security services of the regime, with a total of more than one hundred thousand deaths. Some symptoms, as Gilles Kepel points out in his latest book, illustrate the exhaustion of the possibilities of radical Islamism, at least in its military and political version. But the Islamiisation of the traditional societies of countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Indonesia or Pakistan goes on with more or less moderate social and religious proposals.

The definitive settlement of more than twelve million Muslims in the European Union has originated a series of political and media

debates in the last twenty years, first in France, England, Germany, Switzerland and Benelux, and, recently, in Italy and Spain. I am not going to enter the war of immigrant population figures or the analysis of our successive Immigration Laws, all of them, in my opinion, unrealistic and inapplicable. What I want to underline here is the variety of customs and traditions that exist in the immigrants' countries of origin.

The current vision of Islam, still that of some well-intentioned observers, often makes errors of perspective, owing to their attachment to ethnocentric assumptions and to the mechanical transfer of specific concepts to a cultural field in which they have no place. Neither Shiism, nor Wahabism or Salafia can

be compared with Protestantism, or the identifying Islamism of the dispossessed masses, with our elitist entrenched traditionalism. To warn of the confusion created by the abuse of ethnocentric generalisations it would be enough to substitute the term “Islamic” with that of “Christian” and apply the latter to realities as divergent as Polish Catholicism, Irish Protestantism, the Serbian Orthodox Church, that of the Maronite community of Lebanon, Swiss Calvinism, the Opus Dei, the groups of Quakers and Mormons and the followers of the so-called Liberation Theology. A real hotch-potch! To these confusions and amalgams are added others much more dangerous. In Spain we all know the difference between being Basque, being *abertzale* and being a member of ETA; but with reference to Islam we hear in the news media the indistinct use of Muslim and Islamist terms and the identification of the latter with the terrorism of Al Qaeda or of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (a few months ago in Barcelona a gentleman asked me what it is like living in Morocco with the Taliban!).

This is also the case of a girl from El Escorial who wanted to wear a headscarf to school, and some journalists and so-called Islamologists confused the headscarf (*bixab*) with the veil (*litham*) and even with the chador (at least they did not end up complaining that the girl wanted to go to school with the burka of the unhappy Afghan women!).

Having made these clarifications, I believe that the government, the different autonomies and the municipalities should entrust optional religious education of children of immigrants to a member of the group familiar with their rights in the host society and in no case accept the material help of the nebula of pious Wahabi associations, given that this altruism brings with it the mental confinement of the students in a religious framework, not Muslim but fundamentalist, with the consequent mal-

adjustment of those educated to the prevailing norms in a rule of law. Bearing in mind this risk would avoid aberrations such as the advice in 2003 by the infamous imam of Fuengirola on the punishment of disobedient wives. Let us not get things in a shocking mess: as an ATIME (Association of Moroccan Immigrant Workers in Spain) spokesperson said, commenting on the declarations of the then Delegate for Foreign Affairs, Enrique Fernández-Miranda, on the amputation of hands of thieves and the stoning of adulterers prevailing “in the cultures” – yes, the cultures – of the immigrants’ countries of origin, “those who do this do not live [in the ghettos] of Almería, but in Marbella. And they are very well treated by the Spanish government.”

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If the attack on the Twin Towers did not serve to show President Bush the need to take into account international opinion in his peculiar war of Good against Evil personified by an amalgam of terrorist groups and states – forgetting that the definition of terrorist in terms of law and legislation is very imprecise, given that, as the Arab Deputy of the Israeli Parliament Azmi Bishara recalled, the action of killing civilians for political objectives “is classified, according to the context, as terrorist crime, act of violence, act of war, collateral damage, war crime or legitimate resistance” –, it should teach the countries of the European Union to establish some rules of coexistence with Islam, inside and outside our frontiers. Outside, through the help of democratic forces that, in often difficult conditions, fight in the Arab-Muslim countries for a modern state that respects human rights and promotes the progress of society, instead

of making pacts for reasons of economic benefit with regimes that personify the denial of these principles. Inside, facilitating optional religious education and respect for immigrants' traditional customs, as long as they do not clash with the individual laws and rights in force in the European Union.

A final footnote: the time-worn debate on multiculturalism should, as José María Ridaó pointed out, be based on a minimum consensus of what we understand by culture, as this is very different from the traditional uses and customs, good or bad, of Spanish society and those of other Muslim countries where our immigrants come from (wearing a headscarf, like the Moroccan girl in El Escorial, is not part of the culture of our Southern neighbours but a tradition that, by the way, also existed in the rural Spain of my childhood).

Speaking of multiculturalism in the first sense would be redundant, as every culture – Spanish, French, Italian or Arab – is the sum of the outside influences it has received

throughout its history, and the list of these in ours is extremely long. The uses and customs of other countries, Muslim or non-Muslim, which do not clash with the principles of the rule of law, can be enriching for our globalised society as a whole. The contact with music, cookery and diverse artistic expressions of the Maghreb, the Middle East or sub-Saharan Africa favour a wider perception of the world and its diversity.

Accustomed as I am to this variety, common to the cities where most of my adult life has been spent (Paris, New York, Marrakech), I confess that the homogeneous and compact character of Hispanic cities has excluded them to my eyes until recently from the idea of cities which embraces new and stimulating voices, languages, aromas, clothing and rhythms of life. Fortunately, things have changed and in some neighbourhoods of Barcelona and Madrid I feel like a citizen of a vaster and more diverse world. Historical experience teaches us that we must always add and not take away.